UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/1997/2/Add.11
22 January 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Fifth session
7-25 April 1997

Overall progress achieved since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Combating desertification and drought*

(Chapter 12 of Agenda 21)

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*The report was prepared by UNEP, as task manger for chapter 12 of Agenda 21, in accordance with arrangements agreed to by the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD). It is the result of consultation and information exchange between United Nations agencies, international and national science organizations, interested government agencies and a range of other institutions and individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The present report reviews progress made in the implementation of the objectives set out in chapter 12 of Agenda 21 (Managing fragile ecosystems: combating desertification and drought),1/ taking into account the decisions taken by the Commission on Sustainable Development on that subject at its third session, in 1995. Chapter 12 is closely linked to chapter 10 (Integrated approach to the planning and management of land resources); chapter 11 (combating deforestation); chapter 13 (Managing fragile ecosystems: sustainable mountain development); and most of the other chapters of Agenda 21 under section II (Conservation and management of resources for development), especially chapters covering climate, agriculture, biodiversity and water. Combating desertification and drought cannot be achieved without involving those other sectors. Indeed, Section I of Agenda 21 (Social and economic dimensions) which includes chapters 2 to 8, is also fundamental in combating desertification and drought.

2. The present report is the second submitted to the Commission on Sustainable Development on chapter 12, the first having been submitted to the Commission at its third session, in 1995. In considering the earlier report of the Secretary-General and the draft convention to combat desertification, the Commission outlined the scope of the problem, which places the livelihood of 1 billion people, particularly women and children, at risk. It is estimated that land degradation already significantly affects more than 100 million of the very poorest people in the world, mostly in Africa and Asia.

I. KEY OBJECTIVES

3. Chapter 12 of Agenda 21 contains six programme areas, each with three or four objectives, all dealing with measures and means, at the international, regional, national and local levels, to prevent and reverse the degradation of land resources. During the preparation of the present report, many United Nations organizations active in the field were invited to describe progress achieved, success factors and obstacles encountered to policy implementation, in accordance with their work programmes, and that information is reflected under the respective sections below.

II. SUCCESSES

A. International level: the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa

4. Within a year of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification (INCD) was held at Nairobi. There followed a series of negotiating sessions in various cities, supported by the INCD secretariat. Four regional annexes (for Latin America and the Caribbean; Africa; Asia; and the northern Mediterranean) were also negotiated and included in the draft

convention. The negotiations were completed within two years of UNCED, at the fifth meeting of INCD in Paris on 17 June 1994.

5. There followed a signing ceremony in Paris, in October 1994, at which 85 countries and the European Union signed the Convention. In the year it was opened for signature, the Convention garnered an additional 29 signatures to give an overall total of 115 by mid-December 1996. Having received the required 50 ratifications in September 1996, the Convention came into force on 26 December 1996. The first Conference of the Parties to the Convention will take place from 29 September to 10 October 1997 in Rome.

6. The Convention builds on experience gained from the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, adopted by the 1977 United Nations Conference on Desertification. The Plan of Action places heavy emphasis on the involvement of non-governmental organizations and the need for a community-based, bottom-up approach, involving all stakeholders in planning and management. The importance of national and international commitment is emphasized. The need for improved access to funding is recognized by the innovative proposal to establish a global mechanism to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of existing financial mechanisms and to promote actions leading to the mobilization and channelling of substantial financial resources to affected developing country Parties to the Convention. Details of arrangements for the proposed scientific and technical committee, for the location and administrative support of the permanent secretariat, and for the hosting and functions of the global mechanism are being further discussed by INCD in preparation for decisions by the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention.

7. Despite the speed with which the Convention was negotiated and signed, a further effort was made to encourage rapid action on desertification even before the Convention came into force. At the same time as INCD adopted the Convention, a resolution was also drafted on urgent action for Africa, which was adopted by the General Assembly in December 1994. The resolution called for immediate steps to be taken in Africa, which is especially affected by desertification, and for interim actions in other regions.

8. The emphasis placed on desertification at UNCED and the process of negotiating the Convention have been paralleled by institutional changes reflecting greater awareness and a more positive approach to dealing with desertification. The mandate of the Office to Combat Desertification and Drought (UNSO)2/ was expanded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Executive Board and endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/234 to enable action in combating desertification worldwide.

9. The Convention process encouraged a review of ongoing activities concerning desertification control in other organizations, resulting in a broader recognition of ongoing work. The review showed that several billion dollars' worth of projects that could reasonably be regarded as contributing to desertification control had been implemented, illustrating the developing recognition that combating desertification is not a narrow sectoral activity but requires a broad approach incorporating most aspects of environmental management in the drylands, which comprise one third of the Earth's land surface. Many organizations have now recognized the importance of the Convention and are accordingly reviewing and revising their approaches to working in the drylands.

Agencies with relevant mandates, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, as well as the Sahara and Sahel Observatory, are playing a very active role in direct support of the Convention despite much reduced resources.

10. The evolution of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) has continued since UNCED, resulting in land degradation being recognized as eligible for funding in so far as it relates to the four main focal areas of GEF. Incorporation of land degradation in GEF strategies for biodiversity, international waters and climate change represents a significant window of opportunity for project support, and reinforces the cross-linkages between those major areas and the need for cross-sectoral action.

11. There has been a surge of involvement by both national and international non-governmental organizations. Over 300 non-governmental organizations are now accredited to INCD, and many played an active role in the negotiations, contributing significantly to the final text. Networks of non-governmental organizations have been established, notably the International Non-Governmental Organizations Network on Desertification (RIOD), based in the Environment Liaison Centre International. RIOD is playing a major leadership role, with a concentration on capacity-building and awareness-raising.

B. Regional level

12. There has been increased activity at the regional and subregional levels. The African Ministers of Environment have launched the Regional Coordination Unit, in cooperation with the African Development Bank, with a view to preparing a regional action programme and coordinating the work done by African subregional organizations.

C. National level

13. As called for in chapter 12 and further encouraged by the Convention, there has been considerable progress in the formulation of national anti-desertification programmes, termed national action programmes (NAPs), and a growing recognition of their relevance to national development plans and environmental action and climate programmes. Most participating countries in Africa participating in the Convention have held national workshops to launch the preparation of their NAPs. Government ministries have either established desertification councils or committees, or have expanded the mandates of their environment ministries to work in cooperation with United Nations organizations and donors to implement those NAPs. In addition, some countries, particularly in Africa, have accorded increased attention to their national environmental action programmes (NEAPs), using them as an enabling framework to deal with issues related to the Convention.

14. Many of those States are ready to begin the initial stages of their programmes, although several of them are unable to proceed at an optimal pace due to a scarcity of their own or donor funds. In order to speed up the process, United Nations organizations are working in partnership with a number

of non-governmental organizations to provide support materials to African countries for the establishment of national desertification funds, and are also providing assistance in the fields of national legislation and institutional arrangements.

15. Other affected developing countries in the Asia and Pacific region and the Latin America and Caribbean region have also held desertification conferences for planning similar NAPs. The member countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States have been particularly active in promoting implementation of the Convention, and in Europe there is increasing political awareness that desertification is a European problem as well. There have been a number of meetings in the northern Mediterranean region to prepare implementation plans for the Convention.

16. It is harder to measure change at the grass-roots level of indigenous non-governmental organizations and communities, but there is evidence of increased coordination of indigenous non-governmental organizations, including farmers' organizations, within countries, and of a more cooperative attitude by some Governments towards non-governmental organizations and a better understanding of the work that they are trying to do. Some of the more internationally aware non-governmental organizations are urging their Governments to ratify and implement the Convention.

III. PROMISING CHANGES

17. Since the adoption of the Convention, there have been significant efforts in Africa to move land degradation and desertification issues from the margins to the centre of the political agenda for Africa's socio-economic recovery. The subject has become a regular feature during the annual meetings of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and at summit meetings of heads of State and Government.

18. The Convention and its Regional Annex for Africa received prominent attention at the March 1995 meeting of the African Ministers of the Environment in Southern and Eastern Africa, which was convened to analyse eight environmental conventions of particular interest to Africa. The ministers resolved that the plans and programmes that have been established must provide mechanisms and modalities of implementation. They also resolved to demonstrate the necessary political will to implement the Regional Annex for Africa.

19. That kind of commitment will not only enable African States to make good progress on their own but will also serve as a basis for legitimate appeals for bilateral and multilateral funding. As part of such national initiatives, African Governments are also undertaking to involve their populations in an integrated way in the management of the environment, and to coordinate their activities with their neighbours through broader intra-African commitments.

20. Greater recognition of the issue outside Africa was evident in statements made by environment ministers in Latin America and the Caribbean at Havana in November 1995, and was also evident at regional meetings in Asia. The threat posed by desertification to small island developing States has ensured their

interest in the Convention; Micronesia and Haiti were among the first fifty nations to ratify the Convention.

21. Renewed efforts are being made by several organizations, particularly UNEP, FAO and IFAD, to seek out, evaluate and publicize success stories in sustainable dryland management. The objective is to spread the word about promising initiatives, and to counterbalance the atmosphere of hopelessness that is so easily generated by negative media coverage of the drylands.

22. One of the fundamental issues in need of attention is the more precise determination of the nature, extent and socio-economic impact and costs of desertification, which requires agreement on appropriate land quality, condition and socio-economic indicators by which changes can be assessed. A positive development in that regard is the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development on indicators of sustainable development, which has led to a concerted effort among most interested agencies to establish agreed land quality indicators as soon as possible. Scientific linkages with other major environmental concerns are also being explored through workshops and publications linking desertification and drought to problems of climate, biodiversity and carbon sequestration (UNEP, WMO, INCD and the World Bank).

23. There is also an emerging interest in the health impacts of desertification and drought. Health impacts have been a major and well documented feature of the de-watering of the Aral Sea, and are likely to be significant elsewhere as well. Increased attention to those effects is warranted.

24. A closely related and increasingly urgent concern is reflected in the preparations for the World Food Summit, which was held in Rome in November 1996. The drylands have been called the breadbasket of the world, the original home of most of the cereal crops that help sustain populations. Although total food production is still adequate for the world's population, there is still a need to take precautions against the effects of climate variability and hazards on food security, and the distribution and accessibility of food for the most needy is still far from satisfactory. There is a developing recognition of the global effects of agricultural subsidies, and of the relationships between international trade agreements, food production in the drylands, the invaluable genetic reserve base, indigenous knowledge and development. There is also improved understanding of environmental economics. Those are all promising developments.

25. Another promising change has been the launching of the Secretary-General's Special Initiative for Africa in March 1996. The Special Initiative is a broad-ranging multisectoral programme that places emphasis on many of the factors that are involved in combating desertification, and it should help to provide complementary support for the Convention. The year-long campaigns to raise awareness and political support, as well as the UNDP-led round tables, should provide additional opportunities for gaining support for the Convention. That could be seen as a means of strengthening the General Assembly resolution on urgent action for Africa with regard to early implementation of the Convention. The response to the resolution has been moderately successful, but there is a need for a further injection of funds.

IV. UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

26. Throughout the history of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, there were unfulfilled expectations among affected developing countries that donors would commit much greater funding to desertification control, paralleled among donors by the unfulfilled expectations that affected countries would place much higher priority on the need for concerted actions and that they would ensure effective implementation and follow-through.

27. The Convention has brought new impetus to the issue, and has raised the level of political awareness, but expectations still exist and they are still less than fully met. Political commitment has undoubtedly increased in the affected countries, but few ministers of finance have desertification high on their list of priorities for action, and ministers of foreign affairs or planning do not always incorporate desertification issues and the implementation of the Convention high on their agendas.

28. Among donors, the will to succeed in the area of desertification control has increased, but at the same time available resources have diminished sharply in some countries. Priorities are being reviewed and donors are increasingly focusing on the poorest and most needy, and trying to find ways for more effective delivery of their programme support. That should lead to more realistic and appropriate development programmes, with improved success rates based on the fundamentals of poverty alleviation and long-term food security; in the short term, however, there has been a marked reduction of available funds.

29. Another aspect of that reduced level of funding is that donor support to the United Nations in general and to the multilateral agencies in particular has been reduced, at the same time as the Convention and various resolutions continue to call on United Nations organizations to provide support from their established budgetary resources. Implementation of the Convention is likely to be adversely affected if the current trend continues.

30. Disappointment has also been expressed that the new assistance paradigm described in the Convention, involving consultative processes at all levels, has not been fully recognized. Donors have not been taking up the challenge of involvement in the consultative processes to the extent hoped, despite the efforts of affected country Governments and the recommendations of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

31. The lack of adequate support and of practical indicators of land degradation has long restricted the availability of good scientific data, which has prevented recognition of the full extent of the scourge of desertification and its human impact, which in its turn has inhibited the availability of funding for science or for action in the field. The fact that there is now an agreed definition of desertification, however, is helping to focus attention on the need to improve the database. Work on assessing the economic and social aspects of the problem is gathering momentum, but much more effort is still required, particularly on environmental economics, the effects of trade and socio-economic questions.

32. Despite the major role that non-governmental organizations play in supporting improved environmental management of the drylands and the strong

support of many smaller non-governmental organizations at the negotiations for the Convention, it is disappointing that the larger international non-governmental organizations have not played a more prominent role in the follow-up process. The participation at the policy level of those major grass-roots players could greatly assist the implementation of the Convention.

V. EMERGING PRIORITIES

33. The early ratification of the Convention by all affected and interested country Parties and its speedy implementation at the national and community levels is a continued priority. A good start has been made, particularly in Africa at the national level, through holding meetings and preparing papers, but it remains a priority to transform that start into effective action in the field, with the full involvement of all stakeholders. At the regional level, there is also a need to improve coordination and more effectively develop and implement subregional action programmes.

34. At INCD, one particularly important issue remains to be resolved: that of the functions and modalities of the global mechanism, which has still to be established. The mechanism is conceived as a means of financing the implementation of the Convention, but there is considerable uncertainty as to how it will be achieved, in spite of extensive discussions continuing at INCD meetings, most recently at the tenth meeting of INCD (New York, 6-17 January 1997).

35. A long-standing priority that has in the past been inadequately addressed is the need for building capacity for implementation in affected countries, which is fundamental to achieving successful results. Chapter 37 of Agenda 21 highlights that issue and the Capacity 21 programme of UNDP has been developed to help address it. The issue is so complex and difficult to tackle, however, that despite ongoing and increased efforts there is still a great deal more to be done.

36. Another continuing priority is awareness-raising in both affected and non-affected countries of the importance of dryland environments and the significance of the desertification issue. Partly because assessment methodologies are still not adequate, there is little recognition that land degradation in the drylands alone places the livelihoods of nearly one sixth of the world's population at risk. The INCD negotiations and the bottom-up focus of the Conventions however, have contributed to a greater understanding of the problem and to the increased participation of individuals at grass-roots levels, although much more can be achieved. More attention is required to preserve traditional drought-mitigating measures at the community level.

37. The challenge of alerting people to the worldwide ravages of land degradation is a continuing, difficult but essential task. Work continues on the provision of early warning systems for drought and pest infestations, and of training on drought preparedness and management, but there is insufficient attention to comprehensive drought preparedness schemes or to researching traditional coping strategies in the face of drought. In addition, drought relief is still addressed reactively, largely on an ad hoc basis rather than through comprehensive advanced planning. Environmental refugees attract

increasing attention, but difficulties of definition provide an obstacle to serious attention although the problem is believed to be increasing steadily to involve over 20 million people.

38. The need to further integrate Convention implementation into national development plans, policies and programmes has to be recognized and accomplished, without at the same time diluting the necessity for focused and determined efforts to address the problems caused by desertification and drought. Only when desertification control is firmly established on the priority agendas of presidents and ministers of finance and planning in affected countries and ministers of overseas development/assistance in donor countries will real progress be made at the political level. Increased attention by the international community and at the country level to strategies to eradicate poverty, in particular the hardships facing rural women, can help efforts to promote alternative livelihood systems in areas prone to desertification; however, much more needs to be done in that direction.

39. The issue of the impact of debt servicing on the implementation of programmes should also be considered. For the Africa region, debt servicing is a major impediment to the successful implementation of programmes. Obviously, that issue has implications beyond the implementation of the Convention, but it is increasingly recognized as fundamental to improved development, particularly in Africa.

Notes

1/ See Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.

2/ Formerly the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office; see Economic and Social Council decision 1995/232.